

Richard Fournier - May, 29th 2017

On behalf of the Village of Piermont -
Welcome residents, honored guests and Gold Star families to our
Memorial Day commemoration.

Today, I wanted to recognize a neighbor.

Throughout the 1930's and 40's, Cornelius Kane – the namesake of Kane Park – owned our home on Piermont Avenue. His next-door neighbors were the Fourniers - Garret Fournier was a former president of Empire Hose.

This Memorial Day, we turn our attention to that young man from next door - Private Richard Fournier. Richard enlisted in September of 1943 at 17 years of age. After enlisting, Pvt. Fournier was assigned to the Coast Anti-Aircraft corps in Fort Eustis VA.

The upcoming year 1944 was the turning point of the war in Europe, starting with the Allied landing on the beaches of France in June. By summer's end, the fight had moved across France, into Belgium and ultimately to the German frontier. By October of 1944, the grinding battles of attrition in Aachen and the Hürtgen Forest took place, amidst worsening weather conditions along the Siegfried Line - Germany's heavily fortified western front.

These battles claimed over 33,000 US casualties throughout the autumn, including Piermont's own Sgt. Bernard Haring and PFC Peter Sbordone. The territory that was gained by the Allies was mostly erased by the last-ditch German offensive, the Battle of the Bulge, which began in December and lasted through January of 1945.

The pressure on US troop levels from these campaigns most likely resulted in Pvt Fournier's transfer to Infantry Training at Camp Howze TX. He was later sent to Fort George Meade in MD in support of the First Army, and shipped overseas in late January. Pvt Fournier joined with the 39th Infantry Regiment, 9th Infantry Division situated in Monschau

on the Belgian – German border along the Roer River. The 39th Infantry Regiment would join the First and Ninth Army in the final push from the Roer to the Rhine as part of Operation Lumberjack.

The Roer is a formidable barrier. Typically only 85 feet wide, winter runoff increases its width of to 1200 feet (about half the length of the pier) and its depth to 12 feet during the flood period from February to April. Demolitions of the dams upstream would create a long-lasting flood conditions in the Roer valley, delaying any Allied advance. The 39th was tasked with securing the Schwammenauel Dam, one of the main dams on the Roer. Until the dams were in Allied hands, the First and Ninth Army dared not cross the Roer. The dams upstream were finally secured by mid-February. Pvt. Fournier and the 39th were now preparing to cross.

In the early morning of February 24th, an artillery barrage lit up the skies as guns of the Ninth, First, and British Second Armies hammered targeted German positions across the Roer. The shelling subsided after 45 minutes and the Allies started across the river along a broad 14-mile front. The 39th attempted the crossing upstream of Düren, just south of Kreuzau, dragging 15-man assault boats over the muddy shores and into the swift-moving river.

Pvt Fournier and his regiment faced a raging 10-knot current on the Roer. Initial waves of infantry crossed with few casualties. Successive assault waves were met by enemy mortars and small arms fire until they reached the far side, but casualties were still relatively light. The orderly initial crossing was followed by chaos and delays. Boats were stuck on the far shore and some drifted downstream.

On the east bank of the Roer, resistance was firmer than expected, mainly because the 39th encountered the German *Third Parachute Division*. This enemy division had undergone a quick reorganization following the Ardennes campaign and contained three regiments. A relatively battle-worthy unit, it was somewhat under-manned, but still a formidable foe.

Once across the Roer, Pvt. Fournier and the 39th moved south through the towns of Boich and Thum. On March 1st, 1945, while on maneuvers

east of Thum, 19 year-old Pvt. Fournier lost his life clearing enemy resistance from the town of Ginnick. His 39th Infantry Regiment continued to cross the Rhine at Remagen in late March and proceeded towards Berlin - forcing the German surrender two months later on May 8th 1945.

Today we remember the sacrifice of Richard and the extended Fournier family. We their Piermont family and neighbors, honor his sacrifice and through this annual ceremony, ensure Richard's efforts will not be forgotten. In remembrance of him, we express our gratitude by naming this stretch of Piermont Avenue after Pvt. Richard Fournier.

Keep Private Richard Fournier, and all of our fallen soldiers in your thoughts and prayers - it is in their honor that we gather this day. Also, keep in mind that these sacrifices are not only distant history - since we gathered here last Memorial Day, 33 men & women gave the ultimate sacrifice of their lives in the service of our country. Families of these soldiers, and communities like our own, are facing the raw, recent loss of their native sons and daughters today.

I ask you to keep in mind all of our men and women who are serving our country. As we enjoy this beautiful day in Piermont, away from our own labors, let it not be far from our thoughts that these soldiers continue to stand guard for us on foreign soil, in harm's way.

May God bless them, keep them safe, and ensure they return home soon.